

Thursday, July 27, 2006

The Prime Minister of Iraq came to Washington on Wednesday. And so did the Lieneck family of Deer Park. And David Willmott, the publisher of Suffolk Life.

Every day in Congress demands the relentless shifting of gears, lurching from one meeting to the next. It is a day-long juggling of issues: safety conditions at Islip Airport and security in Iraq; traffic on Commack Road and missile firings from Lebanon; the Long Island Sound and the Strait of Hormuz.

Rep. Israel and Rear Admiral Pecoske meet with the Lieneck family of Deer Park

And it all stops suddenly, when I am reminded of what counts the most. Not the Prime Minister of Iraq, but the Lienecks of Deer Park.

Which brings me to Wednesday's schedule.

The Prime Minister's address to a Joint Session of Congress featured all of the pageantry of a State of the Union address. The booming voice of the House Doorkeeper heralded the arrival of dignitaries: The Vice President, the President's Cabinet, the Senate, the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the Prime Minister. For each, my colleagues and I rise and clap on cue, as if prompted by a giant "Applause" sign.

We listen to the Prime Minister through headsets providing simultaneous translation. When he finishes his optimistic report about conditions in Iraq, I feel as if we should have received the headsets as well as some rose-colored glasses.

I return to my office, where the Lieneck family has gathered.

Last year, their 11-year-old daughter, Brianna, was killed in a tragic boating accident on the Great South Bay. Since then, they have refused to retreat into their well-deserved grief. Instead, they and their family and friends have dedicated themselves to boating safety. As Mrs. Lieneck said to me, "We don't want anyone else to go through what we went through."

Their cause, like all causes, has generated frustration. They have encountered bureaucratic roadblocks and overlapping jurisdictions. They have navigated from the town's Bay Constable all the way to the United States Coast Guard. Their appeals for new standards for boating safety have been directed at good and empathetic people. But the bureaucracy has been formidable.

"Let's go right to the top," I told them when we met on Long Island weeks ago.

So after the Prime Minister's address to Congress, I listened in my office as the Lienecks shared their issues with Coast Guard Rear Admiral David Pekoske, Assistant Commandant for Response. The Admiral listened attentively and offered condolences. He briefed them on steps the Coast Guard is taking to improve boating safety and rescue operations. Then he reported that a Coast Guard proposal to increase training and education for boating proficiency was submitted to Congress last year, but stripped out of a broader measure. The Lienecks and I agreed that I should focus on reviving that proposal; and that we would work closely together so that other families are not thrown into the tragedy that took away their daughter.

After the Admiral left, a family member pulled a scrap book from a large folder and passed it to me.

"We want you to know all about Brianna."

I flipped the pages and saw the familiar photos that all parents cherish. Brianna in her Little League uniform, Brianna at a picnic, Brianna with her arms wrapped around her friends and her family.

"She is very proud of you today," I offered.

People often wonder whether Washington really listens to them; whether their voices are drowned out by the roar of the powerful; whether the issues that are important to them are lost in the furious swirl of other important issues. That is for them to judge. But I do know this: on the day that the Prime Minister of Iraq spoke into a microphone to the U.S. Congress, I heard the voices of the Lieneck family of Deer Park. And Brianna's too.

Posted by: SI